Blue Mountain EAGLE

EPA still in hunt for John Day vapor source

Scotta Callister
Blue Mountain Eagle

Published:
June 5, 2015 3:16PM

JOHN DAY – The source of chemicals seeping through the soils in a John Day neighborhood remains a mystery this week.

Environmental Protection Agency workers are continuing to take air samples in buildings near South Canyon Boulevard, while contractors drill more test holes to tap and test groundwater.

The preliminary results of the investigation point to gasoline, possibly with other solvents, as the cause of the vapors.

The EPA says the vapors are primarily volatile organic compounds, or VOCs.

Oregon Health Authority officials told the Eagle that vapors from VOCs can cause headaches, dizziness or nausea, but those symptoms usually fade when the person moves into fresh air.

The OHA's Dr. Richard Leman said "prolonged exposure" can increase the risk of health problems including nerve injury and leukemia. However, he said, it would take persistent exposure – and for "months or years, not days or weeks" – to increase the risk.

He said this situation doesn't fit that scenario.

The chemicals identified in the EPA probe are not uncommon, and people may be exposed to them briefly in routine situations, he said.

He said one positive is that, unlike some contaminants, these vapors have an odor so people can sense if they are being exposed and get away.

The OHA and Community Counseling Solutions, which operates Grant County Public Health, issued a fact sheet with the following tips:

• If you smell the chemical odor, call John Day Dispatch, 541-575-0030. Dispatchers will relay the information to the EPA to respond.

• If you smell the odor and get a headache or feel nauseated, leave the house and call your doctor.

• Ventilate the house, basement or room where the vapors are found. If levels are found to be high, officials may help with additional steps, such as vapor barriers and gas vacuum systems.

"Sometimes, the level of volatile chemicals may remain high even after efforts to decrease it. In this case, moving to another place for a while may be needed, until the problem is under control," the statement said.

Agencies are not recommending evacuations, saying ventilation seems to be addressing the problem for now.

The EPA is working with OHA, the state Department of Environmental Quality and the City of John Day in the investigation.

Mike Boykin, on-scene coordinator for the EPA, said the agency is grateful for the ongoing assistance of the city departments, including fire, police and public works.

In addition to taking air samples and boring groundwater holes, EPA workers have been taking soil samples in some areas and testing water from city manholes. They also took samples from some irrigation wells this week.

Boykin said that's "helping to build a picture" of the contamination.

"We do have a better idea of the way the contamination is moving, and we continue to build that picture," said Kay Morrison, EPA community involvement coordinator.

She said Boykin reported positive results in one house that had a high level of vapors that couldn't be controlled by ventilation alone. Workers taped off the basement windows, put a vent in one window, and used an industrial-size fan to pump fresh air in.

She said that created "positive pressure" that prevented the vapors from coming up from the basement floor.

That approach is an option for places with very high levels, Morrison noted, but it builds optimism that temporary solutions can be found.

She said the agency will continue to work on locating the source, with a goal of eliminating the contamination.